

THEODORE ABU QURRA AS APOLOGIST*

The Christian protagonist, Théodore Abū Qurra, was Bishop of Harran, (long known to patrology as Abucara) who, as the researches of Père Bacha and Georg Graf have shown, was a native of Edessa, and came under the literary and probably the personal influence of John of Damascus, whom he acclaims as his master. Some of his Greek writings were published as long ago as 1606 by the Jesuits at Ingolstadt.¹ Though not devoid of originality, they clearly show dependence on the work of the last great doctor of the Eastern Church. There was for a long time considerable doubt as to the exact position the writer held in the Eastern Church; the Hauran, Transjordan and Mesopotamia being suggested as the seats of his episcopate. But the allusions in Michael the Syrian, and the ascription in several manuscripts of his works,² including the one under notice, place the matter beyond doubt. From his connection with John of Damascus, Thomas, Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Patriarch Theodoret, Abu Raite of Takrit and Al Ma'mūn, we must suppose that he lived from about 740 to 820, and that the *mujādala* (disputation) took place somewhere near the latter date. He was therefore a man well advanced in years at the time.

I think the *mujādala* may, without hesitation, be accepted as substantially the work of the author whose name it bears. Père Bacha, who is the only contemporary

*[The following paper was prepared for the Royal Asiatic Society on the occasion of its centenary, and our readers are privileged to share it through the kindness of the author, who is at present engaged in editing the manuscript referred to as No. 70 of the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris. This manuscript is ascribed by the author of the Paris catalogue to the fifteenth century.—EDITOR.]

¹ Un traité des œuvres Arabes de Théodore Abou-Kurra, Tripoli de Syrie n. d.

² Die arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abu Qurra Von Dr. Georg Graf. Forschungen zur Christlichen Literatur und dogmengeschichte. Paderborn 1910 Band X ¼ Heft.

scholar to have examined and edited the works of Abu Qurra, decides in its favor. Graf, it is only fair to say, refuses to admit that the work is genuine for the following reasons:

(a) the literary form, he claims, is different, and there is not the least trace of that clear thinking which marks Abū Qurra's unquestioned writings.

(b) The document is worthless historically. It is '*ganz undenkbar*' that Moslem doctors would allow the Koran to be treated with disrespect and misquoted. He thinks that the Moslems would have replied with dozens of quotations from the Koran contradicting those cited by Abū Qurra.

Graf's theory is that directly, or even indirectly, Abū Qurra had nothing to do with the *mujādala* attributed to him, but that it is a composition of a later age (he gives 1365 as a *terminus ante quem*) in which apologists have utilized the name and reputation of the doctor in order to strengthen their case. The court of Al Ma'mūn, he admits, was happily thought of as a background for the imaginary debate.

I must confess that to me this theory of the *raison d'être* of the book is singularly unconvincing. Is it reasonable to suppose that the prestige of any Christian doctor stood so high among Moslems that some hundreds of years later his name, clumsily inserted at the head of a document, would be found to convince where argument failed? On the other hand, if the pseudepigraph was meant to deceive simple Christian people, what was the point of fathering ex-hypothesi fallacious and foolish arguments on a deceased theologian famous for his skill in controversy and apologetic? Polemic, unlike apocalyptic, stands or falls by the cogency of its appeal to reason.

With regard to the specific objections raised against the authenticity of our manuscript, I cannot agree that the differences in style and vocabulary between our manuscript and the recognized works of Abū Qurra are so

great as to exclude the possibility of a common origin. On this point Bacha writes: "*Après avoir lu attentivement ces controverses dans plusieurs manuscrits nous avons constaté qu'elles présentent une grande ressemblance d'idées et de style avec les autres écrits d'Abou Kurra qui en est sans doute l'auteur.*"³

It might be agreed that there is a vigorous criticism of certain passages in the Koran, but I fail to see why this should have been impossible in the presence of Al Ma'mūn, who is notorious for his refusal to regard the Koran as sacrosanct. Our manuscript records that it was only his personal intervention that saved the Bishop from the wrath of his opponents. It is, of course, quite possible that a later writer has infused greater vigour into the Bishop's words, but it must be remembered that he was at this time an old man. Martyrdom would, at the most, only anticipate by a year or two his going the way of all flesh. History can supply us with numerous instances of outbursts from the aged directed against their political and religious rivals.

In reply to Graf's objection that the Mohammedan doctors would not have remained silent while the Koran was misquoted, it may be said that we do not possess more than a précis of the debate, and that we find the Koran misquoted by the learned author of the Apology of Al Kindī. The latter work, too, contains some grossly incorrect statements, yet its genuineness, so far as I know, has never been questioned. Al Kindī is far more outspoken than Abū Qurra in his assault on Islam as a system and Mohammed as a prophet. He accuses Mohammed of lying, murder, brigandage and unbridled lust. Yet we have the evidence of Al Birūnī⁴ that the Risāla was current in a Mohammedan country one hundred and fifty years after it first saw the light.

I cannot find any examples of two co-ordinated substantives in the construct case with a dependent genitive.

³ *Op. cit.* p. 13.

⁴ *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, ed. Sachau, London 1879, p. 187.

Moreover precisely those expressions which he cites (p. 70) as common to the genuine works of Abū Qurra, both in Greek and Arabic, occur frequently in our manuscript. It is significant that Graf admits that the edition of Bacha, on which he bases his judgment as to the classical style of Abū Qurra as opposed to that of our manuscript, has been so carefully and silently "*verbessert*" by that scholar that it cannot be determined to what extent "*Vulgarismen*" occur in the manuscript. Consequently, in the absence of an edition of the text faithful to its exemplars, material necessary for an exhaustive comparison is not at the disposal of scholars. If we accept the work as that of the author whose name it bears, can we feel equal confidence in the truth of his account of the debate? I think there are indications which point to the veracity, if not always to the impartiality of our author.

First. He makes no comment favorable or otherwise in support of his case. The document reads rather like a résumé of the proceedings, drawn up and circulated by the Bishop for the instruction of his presbyters.

Secondly, the bishop is unable to reply convincingly to his Moslem opponents on some points.

Thirdly, the arguments are often those we know to have been employed by Christians in their disputes with Moslems.

Fourthly, although the document records the victory of the Christian disputant, it also records so many points in the Moslem's favour that one can hardly refuse to believe that it gives a substantially accurate and faithful account of what transpired.

Accepting then the general accuracy of the writer, we may proceed to examine the substance and the setting of the dispute.

In the first place, it is asserted that the disputation was initiated by the Caliph himself. Nothing is said as to his motive. It might have been a mischievous attempt to add to the troubles of those whose tenets have since been held

by orthodox Moslems: his dislike of certain dogmas is notorious. Or, as is more probable, it may have been due to the monarch's genuine interest in learning of all kinds. A somewhat similar séance with the Manicheans is recorded by the Fihrist.⁵ At all events Abū Qurra presents to us the picture of a generous liberal-minded ruler who knows how to hold the balance even between disputants, and whose shrewd interruptions shew a clear insight into the significance of the points at issue. It is the Caliph who opens the debate by an attack on the uncircumcised, which Abū Qurra parries by maintaining that the uncircumcised are as Adam was when God created him. He asserts that circumcision was merely a sign—a *wasim* in fact—which marked off believers from idolators. All necessity for it ceased when Jesus put baptism in its place as a sign of the new covenant.

His assertion that Jesus, the giver of the new covenant, is co-equal with God evokes a protest from Mohammed ibn 'Abd Allah al-Hāshimī,⁶ who quotes freely Sura 3.52 and 4.169: "The Messiah is the Word and Spirit of God, which he sent to Mary. He is in the sight of God as Adam, whom he created of dust and breathed into Him of his Spirit." The whole course of the subsequent discussion turns on the interpretation of these words.

Much has been written of Moslem fanaticism and intolerance towards Christians, but the noble words of Al Ma'mūn to the bishop show that he is one of many unnoticed exceptions: "This is a court of justice and equity: none shall be wronged therein. So advance thy arguments and answer without fear, for there is none here who will not speak thee well. . . . Let everyone speak who has the wisdom to demonstrate the truth of his religion."

The disputants are agreed that Christ is the Word and Spirit of God. Abū Qurra goes further, and wrings from his opponent the admission that though Adam was created from a substance known and definable, Christ, being the

⁵ I, p. 338.

⁶ The names of the Mohammedan disputants are probably *noms de plumes*.

Word and Spirit of God, is indefinable and incomprehensible. He then presses Al Hāshimī to acknowledge that he is Creator not created.

On the following day a new protagonist appears in the person of Sa'sa'a ibn Khālīd of Basra, who is described as a scholar, author and theologian of repute, who has specially distinguished himself in overthrowing the arguments of Christians in debate. Sa'sa'a shows his knowledge of the New Testament by asserting that the words of Jesus, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" imply clearly that he was human, one of the sons of Adam. Abū Qurra rather shirks the difficulty, and instead of pointing out the obvious that the almost tedious length of the sentence is to avoid the meaning that would lie in the simple statement "to our father and to our God," he enters into a long justification of the incarnation. And as though he realised that he had not dealt with Sa'sa'a's point, by an artifice familiar in all public debates, he endeavors to extricate himself from a difficulty by attacking a weakness in his opponent's position. Referring to Sura 5.116 he demands, "Why did God say to Jesus: Did you say to mankind, Adopt me and my mother as two gods besides God? Jesus responded, Had I said that, surely thou wouldst know it, because thou knowest what lies in my soul, but I know not what is in thine." Either God did not know that Jesus would answer thus, or he did not know the truth of the matter until he was told. In either case you make God to appear ignorant! On the other hand if you say that God did know, then when was the question put, before Mohammed or after him? Sa'sa'a, after some deliberation, replies that the question will be put on the day of judgment. In that case, says Abū Qurra, your prophet must have known what was in the mind of God before it existed, and God did not know that Jesus had been calumniated until the day of judgment. Not so, says Sa'sa'a with good reason. The question is only put in order

that men may be instructed in the truth. The counter attack of Abū Qurra is extremely clever: for obviously it would not be said that God did not know the answer to the question. Then, if God knew that Jesus had not claimed to be God, why did He ask him? Sa'sa'a's reply that the answer is for men's benefit does not really clear up the difficulty, because question and answer at the day of judgment could obviously be of no help in the guidance of mankind in this life. And we must suppose that an unnecessary inquiry has to be made and answered at the last day in order to fulfil a prophecy in the Koran!

Abū Qurra, apparently conscious that he has still left standing the Moslem's assertion that the New Testament justifies his claim that Christ was human and not divine, changes his ground somewhat. In what sense are we to understand the expression Son of God? You say Mohammed is called an Apostle of God, Abraham a friend of God, and Moses a speaker of God. What, then, is the objection to speaking of God's Spirit and Word as a Son, seeing that they proceed from him? The discussion which follows demonstrates that the contesting parties do not use the same terms in the same sense. To the Moslem the Spirit is the principle of life, which is given to man by God as a mark of honor, and thus he seems to think that all men are in a sense partakers of the divine nature or life which God first breathed into Adam. Abū Qurra, by harping on the text, "By the Word of God were the heavens created, and by the breath of his mouth all the host of them," affirms that the Moslem makes himself equal with the Divine Word and Spirit that created him, and rather foolishly calls upon his adversary to demonstrate his equality with God by raising the dead as the Word of God did.

At this point one of the audience intervenes with the remark that if Christ is the Christian's God, his God is dead. Abū Qurra replies by quoting Sura 3.48, to the effect that God took up Jesus to be with Him. Therefore

he is not dead, but in heaven. With this statement the company agree. The Koran is right in asserting that he was as Adam, truly man, but it also calls him with equal propriety the Spirit and Word of God, a name not accorded to any of the angels, to say nothing of men. The name points to the nature of his being and the sphere of His work in His sovereign might and heavenly dignity and to the majesty of his nature. Here the Bishop asks, with wilful equivocation, what is more laudable than to obey the Word of God? One can sympathize with the wrath this quibble evoked from a man of Kūfa, who complains both of the bishop's verbosity and of the Caliph's patience.

The continuity of the debate is for a time broken by the arrival of a certain Husain, ibn Lawi Al Fārisī, whose name suggests the Jewish origin of its bearer. He breaks fresh ground by asserting that the Christians crucify their God and worship the wood on which he was crucified. Abū Qurra replies in words which display his dependence on his great master, John of Damascus, and further claims that the veneration and kissing of the black stone in Islam is similar in practice if not in significance to the honor in which the Cross is held by Christians.

The next point to be raised is: Who administered the affairs of heaven and earth while the Word of God was sent to Mary? If Christ is to be identified with the Spirit of God used in this sense, which Moslems refuse to admit, did not God remain deprived of His word and Spirit? Abū Qurra replies that God is not confined locally; His presence and His movements are alike incomprehensible. Just as the sun shines on everything upon the earth, utterly uninfluenced by the objects on which its rays fall, so the Word of God was both in heaven and on earth: no place can contain Him.

In order to overthrow the postulate of the divinity of Christ, a Hāshimite, who is not mentioned by name, asks whether Christ was crucified willingly or unwillingly. If

willingly, then the Jews could not be held to blame; if unwillingly, then He is an impotent God. Abū Qurra argues similarly: Is it not true that you assert that we invent lies against your God? Are such inventions done by the will of God or contrary to the same? If by the will of God, we are not to blame. If against his will, He is an impotent God. The company agree that there is not a true analogy between the two examples; for, say they, God guideth thee, but thou dost not let thyself be guided. Abū Qurra responds by paraphrasing the Koran. "He whom God leads astray cannot be rightly guided, and he whom he guideth has not merit of his own." The dilemma either Christ suffered willingly or unwillingly with the conclusion already given will be found in the *Disputatio* of John Migne, Vol. 96, col. 1,340, and cf. vol. 94, col. 1,593.

The problem of predestination and free will, which is thus lightly touched on in this précis of the *mujādala*, is one that was discussed for centuries by Islamic divines, and it is of especial interest to English scholars, since it was a British layman, Pelagius, who, three centuries before our author, stirred the greatest minds of the world to fierce debate. Despite the shortcomings of his theology, his primary assertions that God is good and just, and that the glory of man is his free will and his reason, never ceased to exercise a profound influence on theology. The speculations his views aroused in the churches of Palestine and Syria, whither he went to explain them, were debated with undiminished zeal from his day, finding perhaps their nicest statement in the writings of John of Damascus. How warmly these views were adopted by the Mu'tazila—and particularly by those of this very epoch, Al Ma'mūn himself becoming of their number—is well known to students, and need not be elaborated. An interesting feature in the present discussion is the fact that the Moslem disputant clearly recognizes (as later Moslem divines almost always did, despite the absence of any support in

the *hadīth* of Al Bukhārī) that man is responsible for his actions. So far as the Koranic text to which Abū Qurra appeals is concerned, it may be argued that *adill* means no more than "allows to err."

Little more of interest meets us in the debate, which concludes with the withdrawal of the Mohammedan doctors, silenced yet unconvinced.

It will have become obvious that no definite conclusion could have been reached by the disputing parties, for the very good reason that they did not begin with fundamentals and definitions, but argued from a position which assumed the acceptance of several propositions not previously agreed upon. On the one hand Abū Qurra's failure to offer any explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity (an omission which he makes good in his *mayāmīr* published by Bachd, Beyrout, 1904), and on the other the Moslem's failure to present a reasoned statement of the Word and Spirit of God consonant with the utterances of the Koran on this subject, remind us that both Christianity and Islam are, so far as apologetics are concerned, where Abū Qurra and his friends left them, fruitful sources of misunderstanding the one to the other. We hear at the court of Al Ma'mūn in the early ninth century the same taunts that are heard today that the Christians are *kāfirūn* and *mushrikūn*, and that Moslems have no standard of morality. Neither statement will bear investigation.

It is significant, and I believe hopeful, that as in the Caliphate of Al Ma'mūn, when learning and culture were diffused throughout the Islamic world, so now when the wheel of time has brought in again an age of science and letters, Moslem and Christian may once more be content to agree that Christ is the Spirit and Word of God and that God has breathed into man of his Spirit.

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